

MICHEL ANGELO  
BY W. R. VALENTINER









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Figure 1.  
MICHEL ANGELO: A SLAVE  
Paris, Louvre.

# THE LATE YEARS OF MICHEL ANGELO

BY  
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The following notes were written to be delivered as a lecture, a fact that may in some degree explain their form. The translation from the original German was made by Mrs. James Sharkey to whom I desire to express my indebtedness. Among the authors consulted those of chief importance were Henry Thode and Carl Justi.

W. R. V.

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THE LATE YEARS  
OF MICHEL ANGELO





IN THE whole history of art there is no greater problem than the one Michel Angelo presents; and yet history has furnished us with more documents relating to him than to any other of the great masters. We can trace the development of each of his not very numerous works, and surely the mass of his letters and poems and the detailed chronicles of his contemporaries should throw some light on his attitude towards life. None the less, the riddle of his personality remains unsolved, and the contradictory conceptions that have been formed of his character and his achievement have no parallel in the history of art criticism.

His sculptures seem less the work of human hands than do the masterpieces of other men. Their bodies are as of iron, their spirit belongs to another world than ours. Yet the skin is smooth and supple, and they betray a deep and sympathetic participation in the lot of mankind. In stature these figures attain the measure of godhood, but their souls are tortured like those of the most miserable of mortals. We

can hardly realize that giants can writhe in mental anguish, that athletes may be sensitive to the fingertips. Of a surety a race of demi-gods like these, whose striving souls are housed in splendid bodies, has not yet been born in this world.

The spirit of their creator seems to consist of similar contradictions. It was a colossal energy which with mighty mallet strokes released these figures from the marble block, a most delicate hand that smoothed their surface to velvet curves and to perfection of detail. In great things as in small, Michel Angelo's is a spirit struggling passionately, never quite successfully, for freedom from material fetters.

Certain critics have touched upon these contradictions. We recall Hermann Grimm's beautiful description of the "Slave" in the Louvre (Fig. 1). "In this figure, in the first bloom of manhood, he sees the transfiguration of the last and greatest of human struggles, the ultimate moment between life and eternity, the shudder at once of farewell and of fulfilment, the collapse of powerful, youthful limbs discarded like splendid armor by the soul in its upward flight." Such massive trappings for so delicate a soul!

This contradiction in spirit is evident too in Michel Angelo the man as revealed in his poems and letters. To some of us he seems a spirit instinct with a mystic platonism, to others the

image of a Christian soul. Now he is shown as a man of cold spirituality, again as torn by passionate longings. Some call him a great solitary, isolating himself from a world which he holds in contempt; others declare his social relations to have been representative of the highest type of Renaissance culture. He has been accused of pettiness, intolerance, avarice, and self-seeking and has been described as great minded and generous—and for all these diverse characteristics convincing proofs may be adduced.

As all great masters seem to speak more directly as their years advance, a glimpse of some of Michel Angelo's later works will perhaps more plainly reveal his personal standpoint. He executed several designs for the two great friends of his later life, Vittoria Colonna and Tommaso Cavalieri, whose friendship may be said to typify his dual temperament. These sketches are illustrative of his relationship to both the pagan and the Christian tendencies of the Renaissance.

The "Fall of Phaeton," now in Windsor Castle (Fig. 2), is a design of classic inspiration executed for Cavalieri. It is a drama of the clouds. On high, Jupiter, enthroned on his eagle, launches the thunderbolt. In the center, Phaeton is precipitated from the chariot of the Sun while, below, the daughters of the river

god Eridanus are bewailing the fate of the rash youth who dared to imitate the gods. As in a well-planned tragedy, the motive cause—the wrath of the gods—looms very small; the dramatic incident itself—the overturning of the chariot—is stupendous, and its tragedy is mirrored in the beholders who stand nearest. The design is altogether plastic in conception. In spite of the triangular formation each figure is independent and equally visible from all sides, and the composition—unlike that of a painter—is not planned in relation to a frame but is divided into freely-poised plastic masses. It is precisely when Michel Angelo expresses himself through another medium than sculpture that we recognize most unerringly where his real domain lies. His pictures are plastic art in paint; his architecture is frozen sculpture. This has become a truism.

It is a favorite aphorism that the great Renaissance artists were equally at home in all forms of artistic expression — at once painters, sculptors, and architects. Most assuredly their general standard of culture was high, and their interest extended to problems outside of their own particular province. But human nature, which achieves greatness only through concentration and limitation, was the same then as now. Leonardo was before all a painter though he executed sculptures which were pictorial in

Figure 2.  
MICHEL ANGELO: THE FALL OF PHAETON  
Drawing in Windsor Castle.

Figure 2.  
MICHEL ANGELO: THE FALL OF MAN  
Drawing in Windsor Castle





conception and of which, by the way, we know very little. Raphael, too, was a painter, if he occasionally and with a less striking originality appears as an architect. Brunelleschi was an architect, and when he failed in the competition with Ghiberti for the bronze sculptures for the Baptistry, the Florentine judges were scarcely to be criticised for their decision. Though Michel Angelo exercised mastery over the various artistic mediums, even a glance at his work demonstrates the superficiality of the idea that the great Renaissance artists were equally at home in all forms of art.

There are those who even assert that as he ranks as sculptor so also he ranks as poet. He himself regarded his poems as the pastimes of an idle hour, and great artists are not prone to deceive themselves in regard to their achievements. In fact, these sonnets are rich in self-revelation for those interested in Michel Angelo the man. Regarded as poems they are efforts of no great originality influenced by Dante, Cavalcanti, Petrarch, and others—tormented verses whose overweening pessimism is not unconnected with the fact that poetry to Michel Angelo was rather an artificial impulse than a compelling need of the soul. Were these verses from another and obscurer pen, they might have received a less eager meed of appreciation from later generations.

How comes it, though, that Michel Angelo, preeminently a sculptor, should have executed paintings and finished drawings like the "Phaeton"—drawings which rank in themselves as complete compositions and were in his own lifetime as celebrated as his sculptures? There is no doubt that originally he was but little interested in flat compositions. We know with what distaste he received the Pope's commission to decorate the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Yet in the end he was not working in a medium unsuited to his powers. Twenty years later he undertook without demur the execution of the "Last Judgment" for the same chapel, and the drawings for Cavalieri he did of his own free will.

While decorating the Sistine Chapel he had made the discovery that in flat composition he could reproduce sculptural motives which were almost impossible of execution in marble, and which his daring spirit longed to embody. These were more particularly problems of dramatic action, of flight, and of the grouping of masses, the problems which occupied the artist in his later paintings and drawings. We remember his incomparable rendering of the ascent and descent, the soaring and retreating through the air, of the "Last Judgment." It is as though this artist, ever fascinated by the impossible, who once dreamed of hewing colossal

figures from the rocks of Carrara harbor, had stretched out his hand to grasp the privileges of the gods, as though he longed, freed from the earthly laws of gravitation, to reproduce in sculpture the nebulous apparitions of the heavens. It was this longing for superhuman power which, like his poetic musings on the world to come, gave wing to his phantasy in later years. For, so far as works in marble were concerned, Michel Angelo shared the conviction, common to all great sculptors of preceding ages, of the necessity of a restraint and a repose commensurate with the unyielding quality of the medium in which they worked. None of his statues, from the "David" to the tombs of the Medici and the monument to Pope Julius II, reproduces any transient movement, least of all that of flight. The crystallization in stone of some nebulous vision, so typical of the modern school of sculpture, was undreamed of by him.

When, however, it comes to the spiritual significance of the "Phaeton" drawing, that deeply convincing portrayal of sorrowing women shows that the delineation of human suffering was to be the artist's real sphere. His concern is not with victory but rather with defeat, not with the joys of the gods but with the tragedies that beset mankind, and joyous pagan themes, wherever they occur in his works, are twisted to suit this dominant strain.

Where the theme was religious this transposition was unnecessary, and perhaps for this reason the Passion of our Lord ranks foremost among the subjects of his later years. Then, too, Vittoria Colonna, advocate of an enlightened Christianity, seems to have encouraged this tendency in him.

There exists at Viterbo a work unsurpassed in the annals of Italian art—a *Pietà* executed by Sebastiano del Piombo from the cartoon designed by Michel Angelo, Sebastiano having merely added the indicated landscape (Fig. 4). What a transformation is here from that *Pietà* in St. Peter's, a creation of the artist's youth (Fig. 3)! In this marble sculpture the relief-like conception of the Quattrocento is still supreme, and perspective is obtained chiefly by a disposal of the draperies, which in their fragility naturally fail of the sculptural effect possible to figures. The superiority of the later work, the painting at Viterbo, is evident in its more plastic construction, in the cohesion of detail and the free emergence of the forms of the bodies. The splendidly massed groups resolve the whole depth of the space into three gradations—the dead body, the Virgin's knees, and the upper part of her figure. In sheer moving power, that earlier sculpture in St. Peter's which, placed as it is in the ultimate shrine of all pilgrimages, for centuries has stirred the emo-

Figure 3.  
MICHEL ANGELO: PIETÀ  
Saint Peter's, Rome.







tions of mankind, was probably never again equalled. It is a youthful artist who has created a youthful and beautiful Madonna; and we sympathize more with child-like beings, for whom for the first time the world is falling in ruins, than with the older ones to whom at the end of a long life sorrow is nothing new. The gesture of Mary's hand, expressing at once rebellion, doubt, and resignation, is, in its touching eloquence, unique in the history of Pietà. It is true that the Virgin wears the semblance and the garments of a queen, but she is still human enough to strive with Fate. The creator of this work is still the Michel Angelo of the Renaissance, believing in the beauty of the world, although shades of melancholy already play around his brow.

In the later work the conception is stern and inexorable. The monumental figure of the Mother of God seems stony with grief. She has aged like the artist. Her divinity has vanished. She realizes that her fate is sealed. There is no more timid withdrawal into herself, no anguished, loving glance towards the body of her Son; her gaze, instinct with faith, is all for heaven. This repose, emphasized by the straight lines of the figure in the foreground and by the rigid features and clenched hands of the Virgin, lends something grewsome to the group. Its artist no longer finds joy in decora-

tion and in lovely detail; everything is reduced to the barest essentials. He is one who, if we construe the work with the aid of his own testimony, hopes through faith alone; he is the artist representative of a mighty Church who is wrestling with his individual religious problem and in whom faith, alas, is powerless to cast out bitterness. Only the naked body in the foreground still seems to retain something of mortal beauty—but it is a lifeless body.

Michel Angelo had changed with the years. When he carved that earlier marble Pietà, Savonarola had for the first time essayed to fling his torch into the joyous temple of Renaissance art, and light-hearted Florence had once more put religious passions to rout. A little later, after Michel Angelo had painted the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel and during the most glorious flowering of the fine arts in Rome, there came to that huge Babylon two northern wanderers who were little interested in artistic concerns. The one, Martin Luther, a German monk, crept with thousands of other unfortunates up the steps of St. Peter's, seeking in vain in Rome the absolution of his sins. The second pilgrim was Erasmus of Rotterdam, who remarked that the sermons preached before the Pope treated of Iphigenia and Mucius Scævola rather than of the Passion of Christ. Again twenty years have elapsed and we are in the year 1540. The

German monk has kindled in the north a revolution against Rome whose flames redden the horizon, and the Dutch scholar has sharpened his pen for a crusade against folly. Another Pope, dismissing the pagan ideas of the warlike Julius II, is striving to reëstablish the power of a more spiritual Church.

Michel Angelo could not remain indifferent to the new ideas which surrounded him on all sides at the papal court, more especially as his own nature was susceptible to visions of the dread consequences of sin. It was his misfortune to survive by more than thirty years the period of artistic freedom and to live on among the ruins of that golden age. Leonardo, Raphael, and Andrea del Sarto, the representatives of the joyous Florentine Renaissance, were long ago at rest. He alone was destined to survive in an epoch more absorbed in the Church than in art. He had become, as many of his letters and poems testify, an orthodox adherent of the Church, more orthodox than seems quite natural to a free-souled artist. And still he was haunted by recollections of his youthful days among the antique gods of the Medici gardens, by whisperings of the free air he had breathed in other years at the court of the great Lorenzo in Florence. What, in their heart of hearts, would Fra Filippo and Andrea del Sarto have thought of the theory now

enunciated by Michel Angelo, that to paint holy pictures one must live a holy life? They did not suffer from his duality of spirit. Like him they were enamoured of bodily beauty, but they were not dowered with his deeply contemplative spirit which felt the need of harmony with the religious convictions of its time. It was his tragic fate to be, as a child of his period, a devout Christian, while his artistic instincts blindly strove towards pagan things.

Nevertheless, he was not one of those who sought refuge from his problems in the cloister, whose religion was an excuse, cloaking weakness and inertia. Once, indeed, he was tempted to forsake the great city with its incessant call to labor. He started on a pilgrimage to Loreto and wrote on the way, "Truly there is no peace anywhere save in the forests". When he reached Spoleto, however, the Pope recalled him and he willingly responded to the summons. He could neither quench his passion for work nor quell the inner tumult of his nature—that "terribilita" of which the Pope once spoke, well knowing the very unecclesiastical, lion-like tendencies of his protégé.

This all-compelling energy is still manifest in his later work. Contrasted with the gloomy twilight spirit of the Viterbo Pietà, the freshness of the morning seems to reign in the bold and splendid drawings for the "Resurrec-

Figure 4.  
MICHEL ANGELO AND SEBASTIANO  
DEL PIOMBO: PIETÀ  
Museo Comunale, Viterbo.

Museo Comunale, Viterbo.  
DEL PIGNONE PIERA  
MICHEL ANGELO AND SEBASTIANO  
Figure 4.





tion of Christ" (Fig. 5). The lid of the Sepulchre rises, and like an arrow the mighty figure, with hands upstretched to freedom, emerges triumphant into the light of day. It is the triumph of a superhuman soul and body. This is no still departure but a kingly apparition thunderously bursting its bonds while the onlookers shrink back in trembling awe.

We know how Michel Angelo's predecessors depicted this same scene. Christ is seen rising clumsily, bolt upright, from the sarcophagus, one foot still in the grave, standing rather than ascending. Compared with Michel Angelo's conception, where the figure itself seems instinct with flight, these earlier works suggest an ascension without apparent motion. The effect of Christ's ascending movement, in Michel Angelo's rendering, is further accentuated by the converse movement of one of the shrinking watchmen. The whole composition unfolds itself to the light like the cup of a flower. The dominance of the central figure is not alone a matter of size and force. The simple, clear lines of the body contrast pleasingly with the unquiet waves of reeling figures, like the upspringing of a youthful stem among twisted stumps.

Even without the support of subordinate figures the production of a like orchestral effect lay well within the powers of the master, as

the study for the single figure of Christ betokens (Fig. 6). The tension of the limbs seems like a mighty outstretching after the sleep of death. The muscles steel themselves before our eyes. We see the blood mounting in waves throughout the body. The mighty figure, glorying in its new life, vivifies the whole space.

Still Michel Angelo must have realized that this conception lacked the tenderness of the Bible story, that the God of the Bible is not in storm or tempest but in the "still small voice". Another composition depicts Christ, enshrouded in the melancholy folds of his burial linen, borne on high by light billows of trembling air (Fig. 7).)

One is perhaps tempted to assume the existence of a more subtle and complicated spirituality in the late works of the great masters. In reality the exact opposite is the case, and these works, which seem rather to belong to a more primitive era of culture than to the highest sphere of art, are characterized by a singular simplicity and directness of expression. Subtlety is not the ultimate ideal of the great masters though it may be a mid-station of their development. Lyrically gifted men of lesser genius, whose work appeals to a small circle of the ultra-cultured, may confine themselves to the delineation of subtleties, of those intermediate states of the soul which are in reality

impermanant and, in the long run, wearisome. The allegiance of the really great artist returns ultimately to the portrayal of those simple and powerful emotions whose appeal is universal. Let us take an example from the realm of painting. Rembrandt twice depicted David playing the harp before Saul. In the early work Saul's expression betrays a complicated admixture of feelings—anger, fear, a growing emotion. In the late picture the old man has simply burst into tears and is drying his eyes with a fold of the curtain—a conception that is found ridiculous by those inclined to "preciosity".

This tendency explains the light esteem in which many of the later works of the great masters are held. It is the result of their simplicity and obviousness, of the purposeful avoidance of all glamour that might detract from reality.

The three last Pietàs carved by Michel Angelo are all unfinished and deal with the same problem. In them the relations between Mother and Son seem closer than in the earlier works—warmer, more intimate. Mary presses the unconscious head to herself and a current of sympathy seems to pass between the dead and the living. In the first of these groups, the one at Palestrina, the head of Christ rests on the Virgin's shoulder; in the second, the one in the Rondanini Palace, she bends over from behind

the body, and the hands of the dead Christ, thrust backward, seem to cling to her. Ghostly figures these, in which sentiment alone seems to survive. The Virgin's sorrowful air of desolation is expressed by the very outlines of her head. In the last of these groups, the one in the cathedral at Florence (Fig. 8), Christ's head sinks towards that of the Virgin, and the terrible burden of the mighty body, more poignant in its collapse than that of an ascetic would be, obviously overwhelms her. The stern realism of the broken, twisted limbs, the loving ministrations of the friends surrounding the body, their desolation which robs them of strength to bear it away, all are instinct with a deeper humanity than the artist has ever attained before.

This group, designed by Michel Angelo for his own tomb, was brought nearer to completion than the others. His failure to finish it entirely was probably due to the impossibility of adding the missing left foot of the Christ. It would have been necessary to apply it, and even then there is scarcely space for it beside the Virgin's knee. One feels astonished that such an omission could have occurred in the master's composition. His pupils carried to completion groups which were technically much more difficult, though it is true they wasted no time pondering the spiritual significance of their efforts. When a great genius falls into error it

Figure 5.  
MICHEL ANGELO: THE RESURRECTION  
OF CHRIST  
Drawing in Windsor Castle.

Figure 7.  
MICHEL ANGELO: THE RESURRECTION  
OF CHRIST  
Drawing in the British Museum, London.

Figure 3.  
Michelangelo, The Resurrection  
of Christ  
Drawing in Windsor Castle.

Figure 4.  
Michelangelo, The Resurrection  
of Christ  
Drawing in the British Museum, London.





is as a rule a royal error—a fact rich in consolation for those who, lacking individual creative power, live by criticism of the great.

This simplified emotional quality, distinguishing the later works of the great masters, generally goes hand in hand with a mastery of more complicated formal problems. This mastery in Michel Angelo's case was typified by his desire to carve groups embodying several figures from a single massive block. The wish to obtain symphonic effects in sculpture was not new. There existed already façades and tombs adorned with numerous separate, loosely-related figures, while the combination of several figures in bas-relief was an old story. It was, however, an unheard-of innovation in free sculpture, which, through Michel Angelo's genius, had superseded the bas-relief of the fifteenth century.

Condivi tells us that Michel Angelo when well advanced in years still spoke with interest of his earliest work, the "Battle of the Centaurs," now in Casa Buonarroti, and regretted that he had not experimented further in this direction. It was in fact, only in this youthful work that he essayed to reproduce a mass of intertwining figures in almost free sculpture. Between this effort and his last work in sculpture, the *Pietà* in Florence, he did not again grapple with that problem. This desire to achieve the impossible

visits almost all richly gifted artists in early youth and in age, or, to put it more simply, their virtuosity is then more compelling than at other periods. In youth it is the artist's desire to show his prowess, in age it is the easy mastery of his medium, that tempts to daring flights.

Besides this grouping of masses, however, another problem arose for Michael Angelo's solution, suggested obviously by his experiments in pictorial composition. In his drawings and paintings he had frequently introduced figures in flight and now, with a daring unheard of at that period, he was to essay the representation in sculpture of a suspended figure. This was no question of a mechanically affixed figure, such as the Christ nailed to the cross, or the angels in the Quattrocento sculptures, but of a free, floating body whose position is determined by the surrounding figures and by them is brought into relation with the earth. In the three groups last discussed by us the Christ lies suspended in the arms of his friends, pictorially and in reality freed from earth.

Though the prophetic importance of these achievements in their bearing on the future of sculpture must receive full recognition, there is ground for thankfulness that the master did not pursue the path opened up by his first and highest sculptures—a path leading to Bernini and Rodin—but, instead, during his whole life-

time followed the traditional conception, expressing his mighty message through the medium of a single self-concentrated and motionless figure.

It would be entirely false to deduce from the non-completion of these last three groups that a waning of the artist's powers had set in because perhaps his guarding grasp on the chisel was less sure. Modern psychologists hold, and doubtless rightly, that even with failing bodily powers the mental attributes of a great genius retain their freshness to the end. We can ask no stronger proof of Michel Angelo's unweakened faculties than the designing of the dome of St. Peter's, which he accomplished in his eightieth year.

In his last years Michel Angelo, dispatching some architectural design, complained that his lines had trembled and that he had been obliged to have the drawing copied by one of his pupils, which, considering the extremely minute specifications that accompanied all his plans, was no great matter. Compared to the lot of a painter, even to that of the sculptor he himself was, Michel Angelo may be thought fortunate in that his last complete creations were works of architecture where his great conceptions could shine forth in the perfection of full accomplishment.

We can hardly consider it a mere coinci-

dence that he should in his age have evinced such a passionate interest in architecture. In these last utterances we seem to divine his longings for some transcendent expression of his ideas. He has become indifferent to the world of reality and seeks prototypes of his own creation. There is to be found in the last achievements, alike of the great northern and southern masters, something of unreality, of a phantastic inspiration induced perhaps by a nearer realization of the world to come. One calls to mind Rubens' splendid visionary landscapes or those strange scenes depicted by Rembrandt in his old age—pictures of blind men with groping hands emerging from unreal places, veiled in masses of color, and impressing even the unimagina-tive beholder as symbols of moods of the soul.

In the dome of St. Peter's we have the highest expression of Michel Angelo's plastic ideas, although sculpture must here perforce accommodate itself to the rules of architectural science. Michel Angelo took as a starting point Brunelleschi's famous dome in Florence and sent for the plans of this splendid Early Renaissance monument while he was working on his own design. What he derived from these suggestions may be gathered by a comparison of the two domes (Fig. 9).

In them we see embodied the ideals of two different periods. The octagonal Florentine

Figure 6.  
MICHEL ANGELO: STUDY FOR  
THE RESURRECTION OF CHRIST  
Windsor Castle.

Figure 6.  
MICHAEL ANGEL: STUDY FOR  
THE RESURRECTION OF CHRIST  
Windsor Castle





dome, scarcely separated by mouldings from the drum, rises steep and slender with the slim, angular outlines of the Early Renaissance, outlines that we see repeated in the sculptures and paintings of the period, in Rossellino's works, and in Botticelli's compositions. There is also something of the Gothic in the soaring ribs which form an almost open framework, the spaces between them seeming by comparison empty and unimportant surfaces.

In contrast to this earlier building, the dome of St. Peter's impresses us with its massive solidity. It is largely covered by the more numerous and heavy ribs. Typical of the High Renaissance are its full exuberant curves, clearly defined at the base and the summit by strong mouldings and by the immediate springing of the colonnade of the cupola, which is not united with the dome by consoles as it is in Brunelleschi's work. This is the crown of a development in which rich and splendid architectural forms were evolved from slender and delicate beginnings—the fulfilment of ideals whose promise is embodied in the earlier work.

No less distinct, however, is the spiritual chasm dividing the creators of these two monuments. The Florentine dome, the work of an architect, is, like all true architecture, impersonal, having grown in an unerring way like a veritable work of nature. It is a pleasing play of

forms and lines, harmoniously interflowing, swelling and subsiding wavelike, a worthy crown for joyous, art-loving Florence. The Roman dome is the creation of a passionate personality, the symbol of an inner conflict gloriously expressed in stone. Its mighty swell seems an impulse from the inside, but it is fettered to earth by powerful bonds. The balloon strains upward but the cords that encircle it are tied to the ground by the strong knots of the mouldings, and it is gathered together at the top by a cluster of columns. These opposing forces clash again in the separate parts of the structure. The double columns of the dome press outward, the windows between would seem to thrust them back. The little windows in the dome accentuate the value of the wall-spaces between the ribs and add their quota to the vibrant life of the building, breaking forth between the interlacing lines as if in an effort to grant air to the straining structure. Yet, strange to say, if we leave the immediate neighborhood of the building, and contemplate this dome from a distance, the inward combat of the component parts and their massive, forceful lines resolve themselves into harmonies. Stately yet light, it rises above the walls of Rome, ever striving upwards in soaring lines comparable to those of Michel Angelo's drawings where Christ is rising from the tomb and ascending to heaven.

IT would seem that, of all artists, Michel Angelo in so crowning his life-work must have found happiness. Apparently he had all that the heart of man could desire—an assured livelihood and unmeasured renown. The honor shown him by the world during the last twenty years of his life is well known. Did he become wearied of a commission and fail to finish it, the fact was overlooked by the Pope and his other patrons. The princes of Italy, the Duke of Urbino, and the Grand Duke of Tuscany held themselves fortunate to obtain a small sketch from him. The King of France and the Sultan of Constantinople offered him enormous sums in their endeavors to attach him to their respective courts. Despite all this, to read his biography and especially his letters is to realize that he was one of the least enviable of men. He was unfitted by nature to maintain natural and harmonious relations with his fellow men, to bring sympathy to their concerns, or even to mingle with them without personal discomfort. His nervous, restless nature found peace neither in work nor in recreation. He never married, and his house in Rome must have been but bleak and comfortless. We learn from his journal of incessant bickerings with servants, none of whom, with the exception of his faithful servitor Urbino, could please him. He let the little garden surrounding his house grow wild. His long sol-

itude had rendered him unsociable and intensified his habit of brooding, particularly on the approach of death. When fifty years old, almost forty years before he died, he already complained of the burdens of age, although his constitution was wonderful and he was almost never ill. During the last twenty years of his life his mind was so obsessed with the question of the world to come that, as he himself once observed, "there lived in him no thought but in which death had a part". On the stairway of his dwelling there was painted as a *memento mori* a skeleton bearing a coffin on its back.

He suffered his whole life long from dreams and visions, and from imaginings of possible ill treatment at the hands of his patrons which occasionally wrought upon his nerves to such a point that he fled the city. In an endeavor to subdue these violent fancies he lived with the utmost simplicity, like a poor artisan in fact, ate sparingly, drank not at all, and sought to limit his hours of sleep. Too protracted slumbers induced headache, and he frequently stayed up all night working at his sculptures by artificial light. The short chronicle of his last illness tells us that peace eluded him to the very end. While his friends believed the ninety-year-old patient in bed, one of them met him wandering around the streets in the rain. "What do you want?" said the sculptor when chided for his

Figure 8.  
MICHEL ANGELO: PIETÀ  
Cathedral in Florence

Figure 8.  
MICHEL ANGIO. PIETA  
Cathedral in Florence





indiscretion. "I am ill and can nowhere find repose." When he was again at home and sleep threatened to overpower him in the daytime, he struggled against it and begged to be taken out. Weakness overcame him, however, and, bed being unendurable, he died in his armchair—a stubborn fighter to the end.

This temperamental unrest is the probable explanation of his social shortcomings and of the shyness of which his biographers speak. The master himself, once attempting to explain the reserve which he maintained towards friends as well as strangers, replied that he "did not wish to be diverted by idle chatter from the thoughts that constantly occupied him and thereby drawn down to the trivialities of daily life; he had no time for such things." He took everything too seriously and had none of the adaptability that oils the wheels of human intercourse. From this arose the numerous little slights of which he was found guilty—the non-recognition of people on the street, the unanswered letters, the failure to uncover his head in the presence of the Pope, his abrupt departure from social gatherings did he fail to feel himself at ease—actions which earned for him the name of a proud recluse. "It is absurd that vain busybodies should demand profuse civilities from a busy artist", said he of his detractors and, again, "The true worth of the unworldly recluse must

ever remain hidden from you. Do you bestow on him high praise, it is through a desire to do honor to yourselves and because it pleases you to talk with one who converses with Pope and Emperor." To the suggestion that he was fortunate in obtaining the Pope's forgiveness of his frequent sins against etiquette his reply was, "It is precisely such sins that a Prince must overlook." He had a high conception of the attitude of the true aristocrat.

It may seem strange that Michel Angelo should have had an outspoken weakness for rank. It is a tendency obviously rooted in his artistic temperament, and shared with many another great artist—with Van Dyck and Rubens, with Rembrandt and Velasquez, for example. The outward harmonies of the great world charmed his artist's eye, seeming perhaps to fill that void of which he was so conscious in his own every-day life. Added to this was his innate consciousness of superiority, the necessity of everywhere taking first rank, of ruling even in that most fleeting of all life's fleeting shows—the social world. Had society's conventions come more easily to him they would have seemed of less moment, for his true friends, capable of understanding his inner conflicts, were not among the frivolous representatives of the upper classes but in the ranks of artists and scholars. This with one notable exception who

doubtless inspired him with his ideal of true nobility. I refer to Vittoria Colonna.

Vittoria Colonna had reached the age of forty-six when she met the sixty-three-year-old Michel Angelo. While her superiority of mind drew about her the most intelligent adherents of the Catholic Church, then engaged in its struggle against the Reformation, her personal existence seemed submerged in grief for her dead husband, the Marchese di Pescara. This celebrated general, who fell at the battle of Pavia, seems scarcely to have merited such devotion. Vittoria was obliged to suffer the return by one of his mistresses of some pearls taken from his wife by Pescara and by him dropped upon the other's breast during some fête. The Marchesa's recollections of her idol seem in the course of time to have been purged of all alloy, and the hundred sonnets that she wrote on the death of Pescara did but augment the celebrity that her personality had already gained for her. Charming blossoms of Renaissance culture though these poems be, they do not compel our interest as they did that of her contemporaries.

Vittoria Colonna belonged among those noble-minded and rarely gifted women who are produced by the artistically cultured society of all periods, women who are the patrons and the inspiration of its creative spirits. Their names

alone are known to history, for their performance was played out on the stage of the moment. The written words of such personalities as Beatrice d'Este, Isabella Gonzaga, and Vittoria Colonna would not alone suffice to render them immortal, but their spirit lives on in the works of a Mantegna, a Bellini, and a Michel Angelo whose inspiration they were. Vittoria's visible work was at an end when the charm of her personality, the penetrating sympathy of her conversation were no more—a shortlived work, of less importance to history but more enviable in reality than all the achievements of the master she inspired. The fruits of his spirit were for future generations, hers for the world around her.

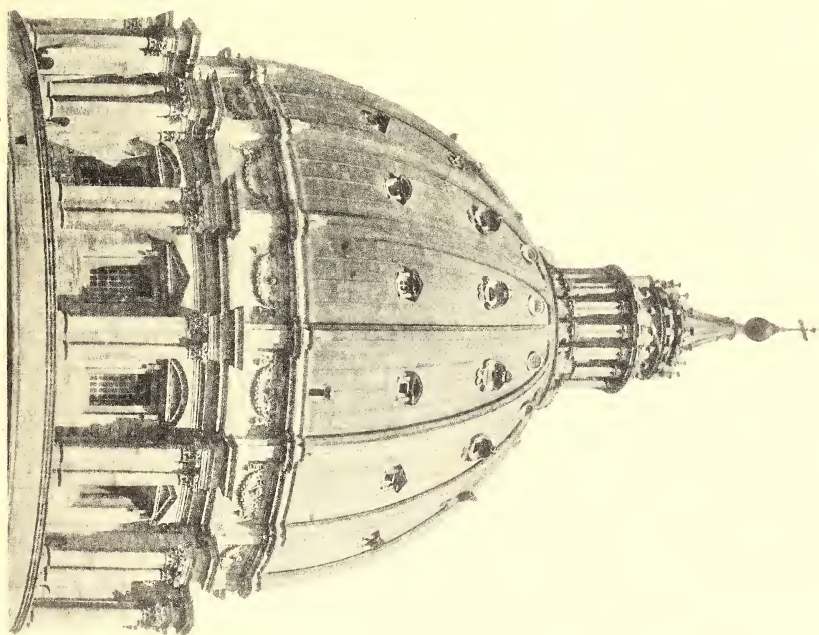
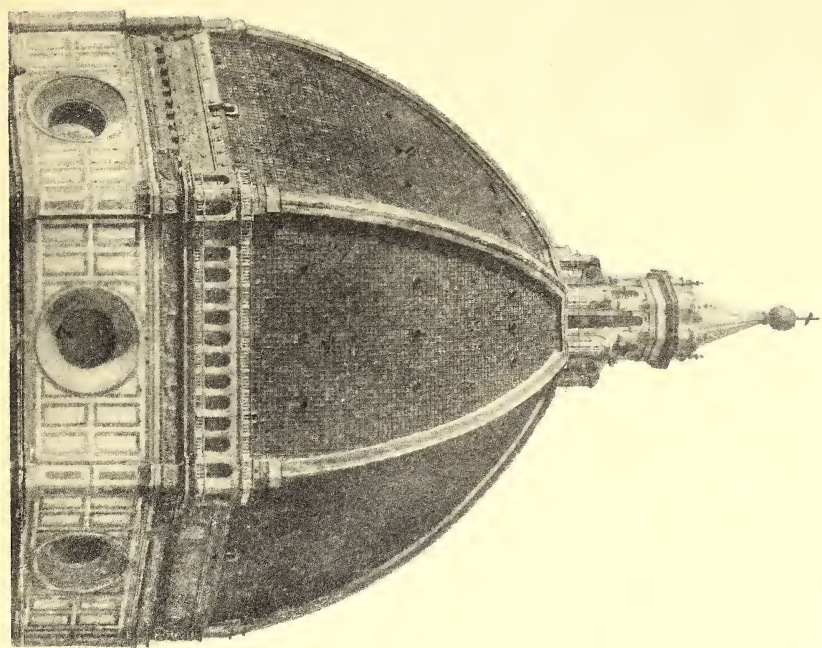
In Vittoria Michel Angelo found high rank and the truest culture combined. Their interest in the religious and poetic tendencies of the period was sympathetic, and her insight into the spirit which animated his masterpieces was deep. Above all, however, she had that facility of expression and mobility of mind for which he strove in vain in his complex poems and letters. It was her gift, when with Michel Angelo in the company of this or the other friend, to direct the conversation with charm and tact, contriving always that the great artist should occupy the center of the stage. With her clever woman's understanding she helped

Figure 9.  
DOME OF THE CATHEDRAL IN FLORENCE

DOME OF SAINT PETER'S IN ROME

Figure of  
DOME OF THE CATHEDRAL IN FLORENCE

DOME OF SAINT PETER'S IN ROME





him over those little errors which would have passed almost unnoticed by another and yet perhaps touched him more nearly than greater ones. In gratitude for this indulgence towards trivial weaknesses he opened his heart to her with the naïveté of a child, with a trust that seems little less than wonderful, if we consider the pessimistic and sensitive nature of the man. It was typical of the inherent greatness of his character that his admiration for this noble spirit knew no bounds.

More than in her poems, more than in her letters, the key to Vittoria Colonna's personality and to her deep understanding of human nature lies revealed in her words addressed to Michel Angelo, "Those who know your works know but your lesser part." No one else has rendered such glowing homage to that difficult and thorny character. It was her immortal achievement to draw the true personality of this lonely and reserved man from the depths that concealed it to the light of day. What an influence this freeing of his real nature exerted on Michel Angelo's work we may deduce from the passionate outbreak of sorrow that her death occasioned.

There is no reason to doubt the truth of Vittoria Colonna's assertion and of that of his best friends that Michel Angelo's nature was planned on as noble a scale as were his works.

How indeed could it be otherwise? The theory that an artist's true personality may well be diametrically opposed to the aspect that is revealed to the world by his achievement, has always been the merest superficiality. As an artist, Michel Angelo chose that medium which seemed to him most natural and expressive—plastic art. The expression of his personality in words or in some form of social activity was not so natural to him, else he would have been a poet or an actor on the stage of the theatre or of the world. The misapprehensions to which he laid himself open had their root in the limitations of his nature in relation to the non-essentials of life, limitations commensurate with his surpassing gifts in other directions. Those who to-day can see beyond his halting utterances will, like Vittoria Colonna, discover there the same spirit that shines forth in his works—a delicate soul encased in rugged armor!

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